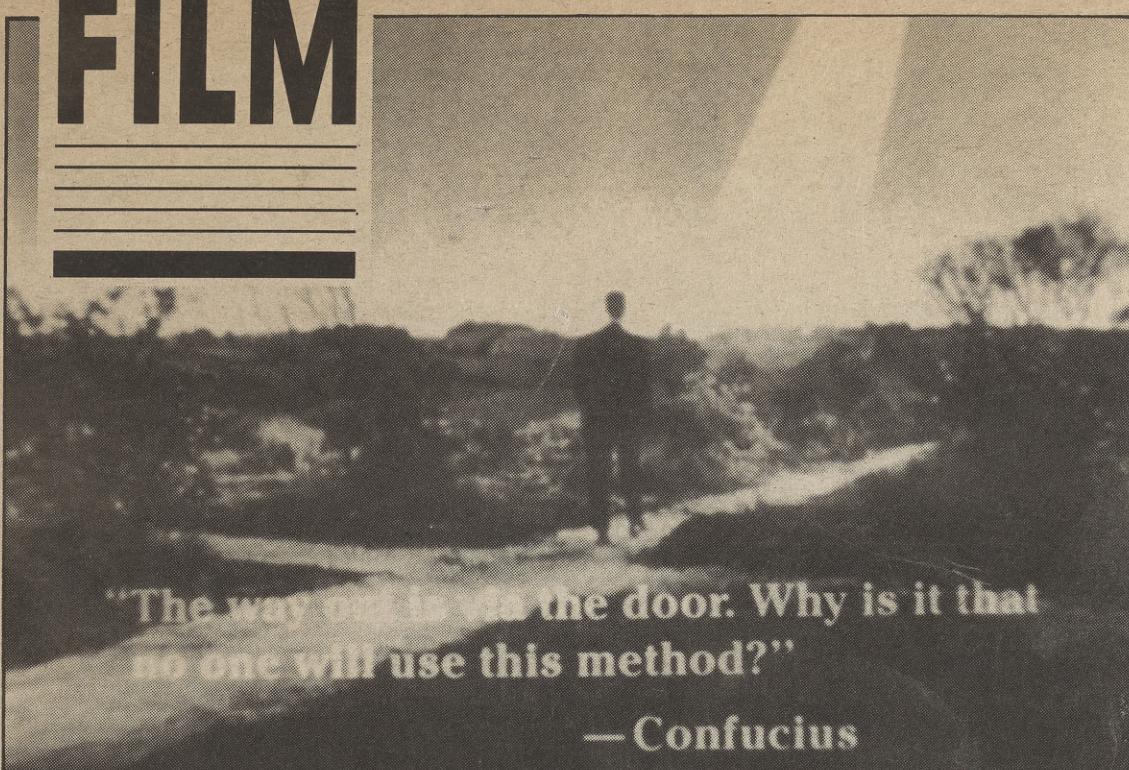


FILM



An image from Michael Wallin's found-footage collage film *Decodings*, playing Friday and Saturday in the "Shorts II" program of the S.F. International Film Festival.

CODE BREAKER

Local filmmaker Michael Wallin's *Decodings* plays S.F. Festival

by Patrick Hoctel

Michael Wallin's *Decodings* says more about intimacy and relationships between men in its scant 15 minutes than a dinosaur like *Torch Song Trilogy* does in 135. The 40-year-old San Francisco director, who has been a filmmaker for 20 years, is happily receiving all kinds of acclaim for this haunting, lyrical and often slyly humorous micro-feature, which shows in the "Shorts II" program of the San Francisco International Film Festival this Friday (7:30 pm) and Saturday (1:15 pm) at the Kabuki.

Besides winning the Grand Prize at the prestigious Thomas Edison Black Maria Festival, *Decodings* has also been chosen for inclusion in the upcoming Whitney Biennial. In April Wallin will hit Chicago, Boston, New York and L.A. on a tour that will eventually wind up at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley in June.

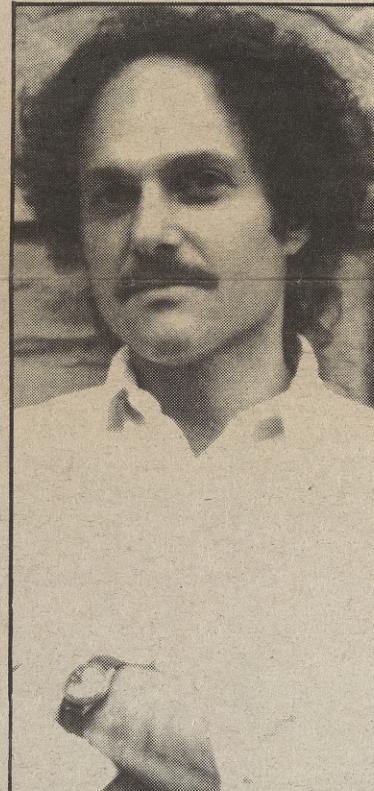
The filmmaker's latest work is a marked departure for him on two major levels. Prior to *Decodings*, the director shot all his footage himself. But this time, in a conscious attempt to do something completely different, he turned to found footage as his inspiration, and old documentaries, newsreels, and scientific and educational films from the '40s to the '60s became his material.

Decodings reflects Wallin's desire to switch from what he terms "camera tactics—ways of filming and manipulating images" to using found footage to produce an effect that is "more open-ended and mysterious."

Although Wallin has had other people work on his films, he never had anyone he could truly call a collaborator until writer, doctor and lifelong friend Michael Blumlein agreed to write the text for *Decodings*. (Wallin, with a Cheshire cat grin, estimates Blumlein's contribution as "about a third of the film.")

Unlike many "collage films," *Decodings* is tight, both thematically and organizationally, with not a second wasted. And in contrast to many films of this genre, where the footage appears thrown together for reasons not readily apparent or for the sake of kitsch, Wallin and Blumlein have taken these images and made of them a poignant whole all their own. As Wallin concluded after editing the film, "They're images I probably would've shot myself."

The director's decision to construct his film from found footage was also based on his belief that "human behavior, rituals and customs, and learning processes are encoded in its media records, film among them." Wallin elaborated further on this theory at the West Coast premiere of his film last October: "Isolating images from



Michael Wallin

their original context—then recombining them in new relationships—intrigued me as a way of stripping the images of their rigidly processed meanings, of *decoding* them."

Watching *Decodings* is a lot like studying hieroglyphics, where forms, and how they're placed in opposition to each other, create meanings not easily decipherable on a first glance. What the director has gleaned from the film bits he's selected—the messages that lie below the surface like pentimento—emerges as a wave of recognition, at once both strange yet achingly familiar, that slowly washes over the audience.

We see men in uniform marching solemnly in unison, little boys boxing, older boys playing games on a playground and rushing *en masse* into the ocean. The narrator calmly recites a story about a tribe of lost men in the desert who grow continually younger, and caps it by telling us how he knelt and did reverence in front of a Marine Adonis ("I placed my mouth over his already hard cock"). We're swept up in the painful realization of what we have always known but have buried or accepted without protest: the destructive prohibitions against men touching or being intimate in our culture, without some sort of excuse, usually violence, to make it okay.

Even though Wallin has described *Decodings* as a "psychosexual portrait told in the third person" and admits that his choice of footage was "guided by personal, almost autobiographical concerns," his own problems with "scary issues" like intimacy and fear of abandonment have been broadened by these universal, mythic images and the narrator's fables into a parable that speaks to us all.

The film's most disturbing sequence, a war veteran dressing himself with hands that are now hooks, is repeated several times and serves as both warning and reminder as to where our society's strictures against men openly expressing affection can lead. The heart that's literally laid bare near film's end appears to be the director's, opening itself up for our examination, exposing its own vulnerability that's so startlingly a mirror of our own.

Decodings is a magical, seamless work that manages to beguile even as it probes areas tender to the touch. Its tale is beautifully told, but as the narrator cautions at

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the beginning, "It is not a story for the timid."

Michael Wallin's *Decodings* screens in the Shorts II program of the S.F. Inter-

national Film Festival, Fri at 7:30 pm and Sat at 1:15 pm at the Kabuki Theatres. SF

CLOSING HIGHLIGHTS

S.F. Film Fest's Final Week

The Weekly's film critics recommend the following events in the last five days of the S.F. International Film Festival. As always, we encourage you to take chances. Unless otherwise noted, all screenings are at the Kabuki Theatres in S.F.

Tabataba (dir. Raymond Rajaonarivelo, Madagascar 1988). Wed 7:15 pm; Thur 6 pm at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley; Sat 7:30 pm. Delicate testament to the little-known 1947 Malagasy Insurrection, in which over 100,000 died.

Lightning Over Braddock (Tony Buba, U.S. 1988). Wed 9 pm; Thur 5:30 pm. The documentary muse of Braddock, Pa. turns to fiction film with a "Rust Bowl fantasy."

Komitas (Don Askarian, West Germany 1988). Thur 6 pm (special benefit for Armenia quake relief); Fri 4:30 pm at the PFA; Sun 1:15 pm. Our Laura Miller calls this a "flawlessly beautiful elegy to lost Armenian heritage."

Evening Bell (Wu Ziniu, China 1987). Thur 6:30 pm, Fri 4:30 pm, Sat 7:30 pm at the PFA. Tense, wrenching WWII story; recently released from Chinese government ban.

An Evening With Joseph L. Mankiewicz, featuring *People Will Talk*

(1951). Thur 8 pm. Mankiewicz accepts the Festival's Kurosawa Award, and you'll see one of his finer dramas, starring Cary Grant.

The Cannibals (Manoel de Oliveira, Portugal 1988). Fri 2 pm. Postmodern opera in neo-18th century style. Flesh-eating, robotics, necromancy, love. Great stuff.

War Requiem (Derek Jarman, England 1989). Fri 8 pm; Sat 2 pm. Jarman's latest imagefest uses text by WWI poet Wilfred Owen and music by Benjamin Britten. Reputedly a wowsers.

King of Children (Chen Kaige, China 1987). Fri 9 pm; Sat 3:30 pm. New feature from the leading figure of China's new wave sets a rural schoolteacher against Mao's Cultural Revolution.

Let's Get Lost (Bruce Weber, U.S. 1988). Fri 9:45 pm; Sat 5 pm. Fashion photog Weber overstylistizes the myth and reality of jazzman Chet Baker. Beautiful and sometimes moving; maybe fundamentally voyeuristic and sleazy.

Die Nibelungen (Fritz Lang, Germany 1924). Sat 4:30 pm (Part I, *Siegfried's Death*) & 8 pm (Part II, *Kriemhild's Revenge*) at the Castro. Stupendous silent adaptation from Nordic myth in newly-restored print, accompanied live on the Castro's mighty Wurlitzer.

Jackie Chan Tribute, Sun 3 pm. Hasn't the acrobatic Hong Kong superstar gotten enough media adulation? Not yet. Features a selection of high-energy clips and the great man in person.

The S.F. International Film Festival ends Sunday. Tickets are available at the Kabuki, at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, and through BASS. For information call 931-FILM. SF



Joseph L. Mankiewicz

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